

8

The
**STUDIUM BIBLICUM
FRANCISCANUM**
is the Biblical Branch of
the Theological Faculty of the
*Pontificium Athenaeum
Antonianum*
in Rome.



series

essays **SBF - jerusalem - 1998**

Letter of James (2)

Claudio Bottini, O.F.M.

The Moral Message of the Letter of James

It is evident that the letter of James presents itself as a collection of moral counsels intended to inculcate conducts conforming to the faith and to reproach attitudes that are to be avoided.

It is significant that at the end of the first chapter James (1,26-27) is preoccupied clearly with indicating what is pure religion and what is vain religion.

The ethical patrimony of James is abundant and is common to other writings of the NT. Here we recall two fundamental principles of conduct that are characteristic of the letter of James.

1. Jas 1, 19-27: Receiving the implanted word in order to be able to observe the perfect law of liberty and to practise the pure religion

This text is rather long, but I think it is necessary to read it entirely before making some comment on it.

“Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.

If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world”.

This section contains one of the well-known passages of the letter of James. We shall dwell on it for a while and comment on the main affirmations regarding how to behave morally.

a. Listen quickly

The section opens with the following call: “Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (v. 19). The initial verbal form “know” could be either an imperative or an indicative. I would prefer the indicative because it seems to suit the context better.

The discourse is set in motion in a familiar way with a sentence that, although in the indicative, is an implicit invitation in a manner coherent with something that is already known (1,19a: “You know”).

The commentators discuss whether the triple invitation of Jas 1,19a (readiness to listen, slowness to talk, restraint from anger) is to be taken as a directive regarding the attitude of man with reference to God or with reference to common life. The scholars who hold it as a reference to God bring to light the continuity of thought with the preceding context, where the James warned his readers against attributing to God the origin of temptations. There he uses the expression “word of truth” (1,18). To this expression he refers back in v. 21 with the formula “the implanted word”. According to those scholars, the invitation to be ready or fast to listen refers to the word of God; consequently, the two following counsels result in invitations to prudence (“slow to speak”) and to patience (“slow to

Claudio Bottini ofm**Born on July 27 1944****at Loreto Aprutino****(Pescara - Italy).****Belongs to the****Franciscan Province****of St. Bernardino of****Siena of Abruzzo.****Qualifications: Licentiate in Holy Scriptures****(PIB: 1975); Diploma****in Librarianship****(Scuola della BAV:****1976); laureate in****theology with bibical****specialisation (SBF:****1979). Professor****(Extraordinary) (1993)****at the SBF (1980-):****exegesis of the New****Testament. Served as:****Secretary for the****publications of the****SBF (1980-);****organises the Biblical****Week at Abruzzo****(1987-).**

anger”) that one may not attribute to God temptation or evil and in order not to abandon oneself to pride.

Other scholars, on the other hand, think that the threefold / triple sentence of v. 19b recalls a traditional norm of a good communitarian behaviour that is characteristic of the biblical and extra-biblical wisdom tradition. They rely on parallel texts from the wisdom tradition (cf. for example, Prov 13,3; 29,20; Sir 5,5.11; 20,5-8). They also take into consideration the fact that the problem of the control over the tongue and of communitarian relations is of great importance for the author as it appears from several passages (cf. 3,1.14.16; 4,1-3). Between the two interpretations, the certainly preferable one is that which intends the invitation as referring to being ready to listen to the word of God. In fact, in v. 21 James exhorts the readers to receive the word and in vv. 22, 23 and 25 he speaks of the necessity / exigency of listening to and following God’s word.

The other two invitations of the sentence “slow to speak, slow to anger” (v. 19), on the other hand, appear to me to refer clearly to communitarian relations. Besides, it is not difficult to understand their logical connection with the invitation that precedes them. The word (of God), which the author recommends to his readers to be ready to listen to, demands the respect for other members of the community. The one who is hasty to speak is likely to hurt the others, thus provoking resentment. This interpretation is confirmed by two elements of the context: that pride prevents / does not permit the fulfillment of God’s justice (v. 20), and that the word must be received “with humility”, i. e. with an attitude opposed to pride.

The initial call is followed by a motivation: “for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (v. 20). This sentence is formally tied with the third invitation, but conceptually it is extended to all the three. The main purpose is to fulfill “the justice of God”, i. e. what is willed by God and what is pleasing to Him. More precisely, in the light of the subsequent context, the author deals with the divine justice that man is invited to accomplish in humble listening to the word and in putting it into practice. All this is obstructed in the first place by anger, but in general by those behaviours that are contrary to that which is inculcated in the triple sentence of v. 19b: they, in fact, do not permit man to do that which is just and holy before the eyes of God to obtain moral perfection.

Hence the invitation “everyone be ready to listen” refers, as it appears immediately afterwards, to the listening of the word of God, while the other two “everyone be ... slow to speak, slow to anger” refer to communitarian relations.

b. Receiving the implanted word with meekness

In v. 21 the author continues: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness [= and every trace of evil] and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls”.

The two expressions “filthiness and rank growth of wickedness”, as read in Revised Standard Version, probably constitute a hendiadys, i. e. a unique concept expressed by two coordinating terms in the meaning of “the whole dirty mass of wickedness”. Some commentators propose: “overflowing of malice”, or “profuse wickedness” (cf. O. H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* [NIGTC], Grand Rapids 1982, 94. The general meaning that results from the exhortation is clear: the faithful are invited to put away all that is evil.

After the negative part there comes the positive: the author invites his readers to “receive the word with meekness”, or better with “humility”. He thus inculcates the attitude of humility and meekness, opposed to pride, which is characteristic to those who are submissive to the Lord.

The reception refers to “the word that has been implanted” in the faithful. There is a lot of discussion among scholars on the meaning of the expression. The translation given by the Revised Standard Version probably resounds the influence of the Gospel parable of the sower (cf. Mk 4,3-4.14-20 and its parallels): for that which is implanted is the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Mt 13,4-15; 18,23; 1Thes 1,6; 2,13; 1Cor 3,6). Others translate the adjective with other equivalents: “infused” or “innate” or “inborn”. Those who hold that our section derives from the baptismal paraenesis of the first Christians understand it in connection with “word of truth” of 1,18. The reference is, then, to the baptismal instruction... the communication of the Christian fundamental truths, which have not only Christologico-soteriological content but also ethical” (F. Mussner, *La lettera di Giacomo*, Brescia 1970, 147-148). Such exegetical orientation, according to which “the word that has been sowed” is synonymous with the Gospel, is very ancient and widely diffused.

Others hold, on the other hand, that the adjective here has the meaning of “innate” or “natural”, as in another biblical passage (cf. Wis 12,10) and in Hellenistic literature (Josephus, *War* 1,88; *Ant.* 16,232; Philo, *Deus Imm.* 22; Ps.-Phocylides 128). According to this interpretation the “innate word” would not be anything else than the natural law written in the heart of man. Still other interpreters has identified this “innate” natural law with the Mosaic law, which the faithful are invited to obey.

Finally a contemporary scholar has examined anew all the problems and sought to determine the nature of the “implanted word” precise and to ascertain in what sense it could be received or accepted (R. Fabris, *Legge della libertà in Giacomo*, Paideia, Brescia 1977). He concludes that “the





implanted word” is the Gospel or the interior word which has the power to save; it is a word or interior law placed in the heart; it is the wisdom from above, gift of God, which should be accepted and actualized in charity (3,17), and is to be identified with the “perfect law” (1,25) and “royal law” (2,8.23).

James himself suggests to give the meaning of “perfect law of liberty” (1,25) to the expression “implanted” or “sowed word”. That word “can save your souls”, i. e. the whole man, described in the biblical way (v. 24). It is clear that the final salvation is intended here, which is obtained by the forgiveness of sins and the liberation from the judgment of condemnation. Hence, to participate in salvation the believer has to observe all the law summarized in the precept that imposes the love of one’s neighbour because “the judgment will be without mercy against him who has not shown mercy” (2,13).

The “sowed word”, which has the duty to guarantee the final salvation, should therefore be interpreted in the light of “perfect law of liberty”, about which the author of the letter speaks immediately after.

c. Putting into practice the perfect law of liberty

After having exhorted his readers to accept the word sowed in them the author admonishes them not to stop there but to go on to practice it. He says: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”; he then continues in the third person, simply identifying the hearers with the doers of the word: “For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing”.

The expression “doers of the word” in v. 22 is equivalent to “executors of the works” in v. 25. It indicates the fulfillment of the things which the word as much as it is law, i. e. the expression of the will of God, commands to observe. The expression “be those who put in practice” at the beginning of the exhortation underlines the dynamic dimension that the listening to the word bears with it. Those who limit themselves to simple listening deceive themselves with false reasonings or specious self-justification.

The author illustrates in what consists the self-illusion which he has denounced (vv. 23-24) by taking an example from ordinary life: the metaphor of the mirror, well-known in the biblical literature and elsewhere. The hearing of the word without doing it does not bring one’s salvation just as a hasty glance at one’s face does not advance in any way one’s own look. This glance at the mirror gives one only the satisfaction of one’s momentary curiosity without any consequence. The same is the case with those who hear the word without caring to put it into action.

From v. 25 there results that in the moral life the mirror is nothing else but the “perfect law of liberty”. A lot has been written on this expression, one of the most well-known in the letter of James.

In synthesis we can say that for some the law is that of the Gospel, by means of which, as much as it is the word of truth, has come the spiritual birth of the Christians, the early fruit of universal salvation. As implanted word, gift and interior law similar to the wisdom from above, the Gospel can lead to salvation. It is a perfect law, as much as it can realize perfection, which is the gift of God and which is actualized in charity. Besides, it is the law of liberty because it is the foundation of liberty, i. e. a free acting, as much as it is the interior principle of action which is actualized in love (cf. Fabris, *Legge della libertà*, 154-159).

This interpretation is coherent because it seeks to interpret the formula “perfect law of liberty” in its immediate and remote contexts. Nevertheless, this formula could be explained in a more simple way in the light of what we read in another passage where it is again used. In the next chapter James affirms: “Indeed, if you really fulfill the royal law, according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ said also, ‘Do not kill.’ If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.”

From this passage we learn that the “perfect law of liberty” is nothing else than the expression of the will of God contained in the Scripture.

This interpretation does not exclude the other one which directly identifies the “perfect law of liberty” with the Gospel. Indeed the Gospel has been announced to reaffirm the perennial value of the commandment of God, which consists precisely in the love of the neighbour (cf. Mk 12, 29-31 and its parallels; Mt 5, 43-48).

In conclusion we may say that the “perfect law of liberty” of v. 25 is simply that perfect law which leads to liberty those who look into it and translate it into works with fidelity. It keeps man free from sin and permits him to find true happiness.

The SBF is today a Roman Catholic Faculty of biblical and archaeological studies in the Holy Land sponsored by the Franciscan Custody of Terrasanta. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the Flagellation friary at the IInd Station of the Via Dolorosa.

As a research center, the SBF has been actively involved in rediscovering the sacred sites of the NT and early Christianity. Thus it expands and updates the histories of various Christian shrines. There is a special focus on the primitive Church in the Holy Land by making use of Jewish and Christian literary sources as well as the diaries and travel journals of pilgrims down through the centuries.

The SBF is also responsible for the courses of theological formation at the "Studium Theologicum Jerosolymitanum" in the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour.



d. The Religion pure and undefiled (vv. 26-27)

In the last part of the section the theme of true religion is dealt with in some detail: "If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." The author begins with proposing the case of alleged religiosity, which he defines as "vain" or "empty". Actually, the presumption of the authentic religiousness is denied by the fact that one is not able to control his own tongue.

Then the characteristics of a religiosity "pure and undefiled" are indicated. The first concrete sign of such religiosity consists in "visiting orphans and widows in their distress", i.e. in providing concrete help to orphans and widows, two categories of the needy who find themselves in a state of "tribulation" because of the social and moral oppression in which they live. It is clear that these were typical examples for all those who suffer distress and oppression. The act of helping orphans and widows was very often commanded in the Old Testament and early church (cf. Is 1,10-17; Dt 14,29; 24,17-22; Jer 5,5,28; Ezk 22,7; Zec 7,10; Sir 4,10; Job 29,16; Acts 6,1-6; 1Tim 5,3-16).

The second characteristic of an authentic religion consists in "keeping oneself unstained from the world". The term "world" has here a negative meaning as it appears in a later section of the Letter of James (4,1-7) in which the addressees, entirely addicted to the worldly sphere (pleasures, disunity, quarrels and divisions) (vv. 1-3), are called "adulterers" and are invited to choose radically between God and the world (4,4: cf. Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13). In the light of this, the world, enemy of God, is that in which the devil is present by means of pride and injustice. From "this world" the believers should "keep themselves pure" by submitting to God (4,10), by docile listening to the word and by the faithful fulfillment of the "perfect law of liberty".

In short we may say that in the text examined, as in all of his writing, James recommends a synthesis between believing the word of God and putting it in practice. Without such a synthesis hearing the word of God is illusory and the religiosity results in a pretext, vain and inconsistent affair. It is vain to put orthopraxis in opposition to orthodoxy: in christianity the one is inseparably linked to the other. This is a fundamental principle of christian behaviour, which is based on the teaching of Jesus himself (cf. Mt 7,21.24-27; 23,3; 25,35-36; Gv 13,7). Its observance keeps the believer away from the "double-mindedness of the soul" (*dypsychia*), which consists in not doing what one believes, and leads him to moral perfection and blessedness.

2. Jas 3, 13-18: The Earthly Wisdom and the Heavenly Wisdom

From the letter of James we gain not only a lively vibrating invitation to be the doers of the word and to practice justice as an authentic religion, but also an indication of what is to be done in order to realize that programme. This is what we get from the discussion of Jas 3,13-18 on wisdom and wise man. First of all let us read once this section.

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace".

As often it happens in his writing, the author addresses his audience directly through a question to which he himself gives an answer. "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom" (v. 13). James seems to say that in the community one who believes to be "wise and understanding" should demonstrate that quality concretely, not in words but by his works realized through his good conduct.

He warns that such good works are to be done under the inspiration of a "wise meekness" (literally: "in the meekness of wisdom"). James knows that even good works can be done with a wrong mentality. So he recommends that doing good may not be inspired or accompanied by an attitude of pride. He, who boasts of the good works that he does, is not only not meek and submissive to the will of God because he seeks to satisfy his own (religious) vanity, but also shows himself to be not even wise. He should only thank God with religious fear because of the good works that he does, thus showing his wisdom. In fact - as James explains it immediately - the wisdom that leads to do good is a gift of God.

James is fond of explaining things through black-and-white comparisons, without gray zones. This trait also is seen in the discussion on wisdom. He clearly distinguishes two types of wisdom: the one terrestrial, animal-like and devilish, which is against the truth and is the source of all wicked actions; the other celestial or divine, which is the source of every good fruit that leads to peace.

The wisdom cannot co-exist with the "bitter jealousy" of wisdom or/and of the good of others. He

SBF

**Councils and Officers
1997-98**

- **Director Pro-Dean**
Manns Frédéric
- **Senatorial Deputation:**
Frédéric Manns, D. Chrupcala,
A. Marcello Buscemi
- **Faculty Council:**
Bissoli Giovanni, Bottini
Giovanni Claudio, Buscemi
Alfio Marcello, Chrupca a
Daniel, Cignelli Lino, Ianniello
Vincenzo, Kraj Jerzy (Mod.
STJ), Loffreda Stanislaw,
Manns Frédéric, Niccacci
Alviero, Pappalardo Carmelo
(stud. rep.), Piccirillo Michele
- **Secretary of SBF:**
Massimo Pazzini
- **Director's Council:**
Frédéric Manns, A. M.
Buscemi, Massimo Pazzini
- **Librarian:**
Plácido Robaert
- **Council of the librarian:**
P. Robaert, A. Niccacci, E.
Alliata, G.C. Bottini
- **Bursar:**
Giovanni Bissoli
- **Board of directors:**
G. Bissoli, A.M. Buscemi, M.
Pazzini, P. Robaert
- **Editorial Secretary:**
G. Claudio Bottini
- **Assistant editorial secretary:**
Eugenio Alliata
- **Editorial council:**
F. Manns, G. C. Bottini, E.
Alliata, D. Chrupca a.
- **Museum Director:**
Michele Piccirillo
- **Council of the Museum
Director:**
Michele Piccirillo, Vincenzo
Ianniello, Pietro Kaswalder
- **Secretary of the Technical
office:**
Eugenio Alliata

who has such an attitude in his heart is in reality not wise. Hence James exhorts not to boast because the one who boasts would lie and would find himself against the truth.

Then James continues adding that such alleged wisdom does not go together with the one “celestial and divine” but against it because of its negative qualities, which James recalls in a pejorative crescendo. It is “terrestrial”, i.e. not of divine origin; it is “carnal (or animal)”, that is to say, that it is a only a natural product of human nature, and not a gift of the Spirit of God; it is “diabolical (or devilish)”, that is to say, it has the origin from devil, the spirit of evil, who by nature is opposed to the will and act of God. Then it gives the reason for a judgment so negative, saying: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (v. 16). He who behaves in this way shows that he does not possess the celestial wisdom but only the diabolical one. Jealousy and the spirit of rivalry lead him to live disorderly and to do evil.

James compares this wisdom with another wisdom which is defined and described through a series of attributes: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity”. With the adverb “from above” he implicitly indicates that this wisdom is divine, coming from God as a gift of his grace and hence could be said as divine, celestial, spiritual, supernatural. If we observe the qualifications that the author attributes to this divine wisdom, we see that they are opposed to jealousy and rivalry and correspond to the virtues that generate justice, harmony and good works.

James underlines the particular fecundity of such wisdom saying: “And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (v. 18). The purport of this affirmation is somehow mysterious. It could mean that since divine wisdom is not pushed by jealousy or spirit of contest, but on the contrary is a source of concord and peace, those who possess it are makers of peace among men. Besides, as peace is the fruit of a good conduct, one can say that a fruit of justice is sowed by the peacemakers. This results in an image in which symbolically the seed that is sowed is nothing other than the fruit collected, i. e. justice. “Certainly there is tautology here - comments a contemporary scholar -, but it is that type of emphatic tautology which is used for rhetorical effect” (Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 155). Those who do good according to divine wisdom produce peace; in this peace generated by their good conduct they fulfill the justice because they put in practice the law of God. In other words: “Who are those who in fact are doing justly? Those who make peace, who do their just acts in a peaceful way. The phrase recalls Jesu’s word in Mt. 5:9 to the reader: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers...’ Peace in the community, then, is the sum of the matter of doing justice” (Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 155).

Hence, it is evident that the divine wisdom, of which James has weaved the eulogy, is for him a principle of Christian action, as much as it inspires and guides him who possesses it to fulfill the justice, i. e. the will of God and to be truly “wise and understanding”. That is, it is directed towards salvation, the supreme good according to faith.

In the light of this observation we understand why the author of the Letter invites his audience to pray to invoke wisdom from God. In fact one of the first exhortations of James reads: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord” (1,5-7).

Conclusion

Finally we can summarize the instruction of James on Christian wisdom and bring it into connection with the implanted word: (first) he who believes to be “intelligent” and “wise” should demonstrate his wisdom with the works resulting from his good conduct; (second) the terrestrial, animal and diabolical wisdom is contrary to the truth and is the source of every evil deed; (third) celestial or divine wisdom is the source of every good fruit that brings peace; (and fourth) wisdom is to be requested from God because it is faith that renders man wise by guiding him to a good conduct, which produces good works. Thus the Christians become the doers of the word, actualize justice, the will of God, and can hope to find mercy from God in the day of judgment and to be saved.

This is the purpose of the word which God has implanted in man, when he created him with his word of truth, the word, “which is able to save (our) souls” (1,21). Moral perfection and salvation are not results of human efforts alone, but first of all, they are gifts of God, “the Father of lights from whom every good gift comes” (1,17).